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Fragment of the month

FOTM 2020

> [Fragment of the Month: December 2020](#)> [Fragment of the Month: November 2020](#)> [Fragment of the Month: October 2020](#)> [Fragment of the Month: September 2020](#)> [Fragment of the Month: August 2020](#)> [Fragment of the Month: July 2020](#)> [Fragment of the Month: June 2020](#)> [Fragment of the Month: May 2020](#)> [Fragment of the Month: April 2020](#)> [Fragment of the Month: March 2020](#)> [Fragment of the Month: February 2020](#)> [Fragment of the Month: January 2020](#)

FOTM 2021

FOTM 2019

FOTM 2018

FOTM 2017

[Fragment of the Month: December 2016](#)[Fragment of the Month: November 2016](#)[Fragment of the Month: October 2016](#)[Fragment of the Month: September 2016](#)[Fragment of the Month: August 2016](#)[Fragment of the Month: June 2016](#)[Fragment of the Month: May 2016](#)[Fragment of the Month: April 2016](#)[Fragment of the Month: January 2016](#)[Fragment of the Month: September 2015](#)[Fragment of the Month: August 2015](#)[Fragment of the Month: June 2015](#)[Fragment of the Month: April 2015](#)[Fragment of the Month: March 2015](#)[Fragment of the Month: February 2015](#)[Fragment of the Month: January 2015](#)[Fragment of the Month: December 2014](#)[Fragment of the Month: November 2014](#)[Fragment of the Month: October 2014](#)[Fragment of the Month: September 2014](#)[Fragment of the Month: May 2014](#)[Addendum to November 2011's](#)[Fragment of the Month](#)[FRAGMENT OF THE MONTH ARCHIVE](#)

Fragment of the Month: March 2020

Addressing the Rambam: JTS ENA 4020.56

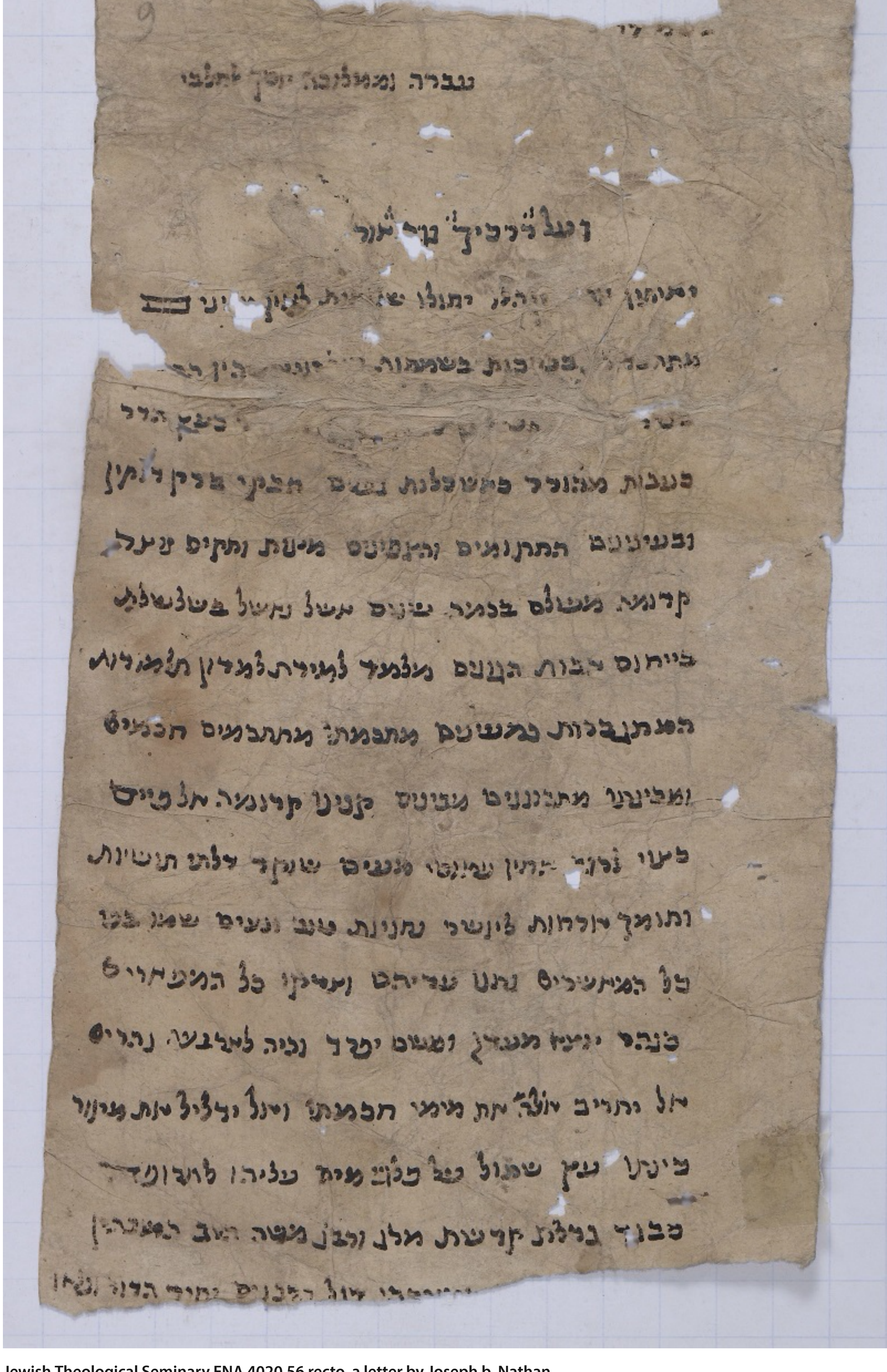
Amir Ashur and Ben Outhwaite

The identification of autograph manuscripts of Moses Maimonides has long been a focus of Genizah research. Perhaps the most famous autograph in the Cambridge Genizah, T-S 12.192, the Rambam's short letter to al-Sayk al-Iqa on behalf of new immigrants to Egypt, Isaac al-Darī and his son, was first published by Richard Gottheil in 1936. Its significance lies in the fact that the Rambam signed it with his full name, Moses son of the scholar Maymūn, whereas most other autograph material is either unsigned (e.g., his letter to a judge, T-S AS 149.89) or, as is often the case with his responsa, simply marked with *ameh* *me*, 'written by Moses' (e.g., T-S AS 111.164).

While the scarce autograph writings give us insight into Maimonides' writing process (through his draft works and fair copies), his communal responsibilities (notes and circulars he wrote) and his daily life (through letters), there is a wealth of material available that fills out that picture with a larger sense of where he stood in the Jewish community of Egypt, his reputation in the Jewish world beyond, and the attitude towards him of his contemporaries. Scholars have been finding letters to and about Maimonides for many years – the late Joel Kraemer's 'Six unpublished Maimonides letters from the Cairo Genizah' (1990) is a good example of some of the riches available – but there has not been a systematic search for such 'secondary' texts. S. D. Goitein clearly saw this letter, as he refers to it in his card index, but he did not include it in his index of Maimonides. That such texts remain to be read shows that there is still much potential in surveying the Genizah collections worldwide for documents relating to the wider circle of Maimonides and his world.

The following document is a good, but sadly curtailed, example of the type of material that probably lies unidentified in the various Genizah collections. It is the opening of a long Hebrew letter (at least the opening is in Hebrew; the business of the letter itself might well have been in Judeo-Arabic), from Joseph b. Nathan al-Halabi, from Aleppo. The ornate opening addresses a very distinguished man, an authority in his community and a teacher of renown. The great length of the opening salutations delays the appearance of the recipient's name until line 20, and only the first name, Moses, is given before the manuscript breaks off. The address on verso clearly states that it is addressed to Moses son of Maymūn, however. The Rambam's connection with Aleppo is well known: his most beloved student, Joseph b. Judah, for whom Maimonides wrote the 'Guide for the Perplexed', was also from Aleppo. It seems he had a number of followers from that town, and we also have a legal query sent to him from Aleppo (Blau 1960: 515–516 [§269]). The present correspondent, Joseph al-Halabi, is not yet known from other sources.

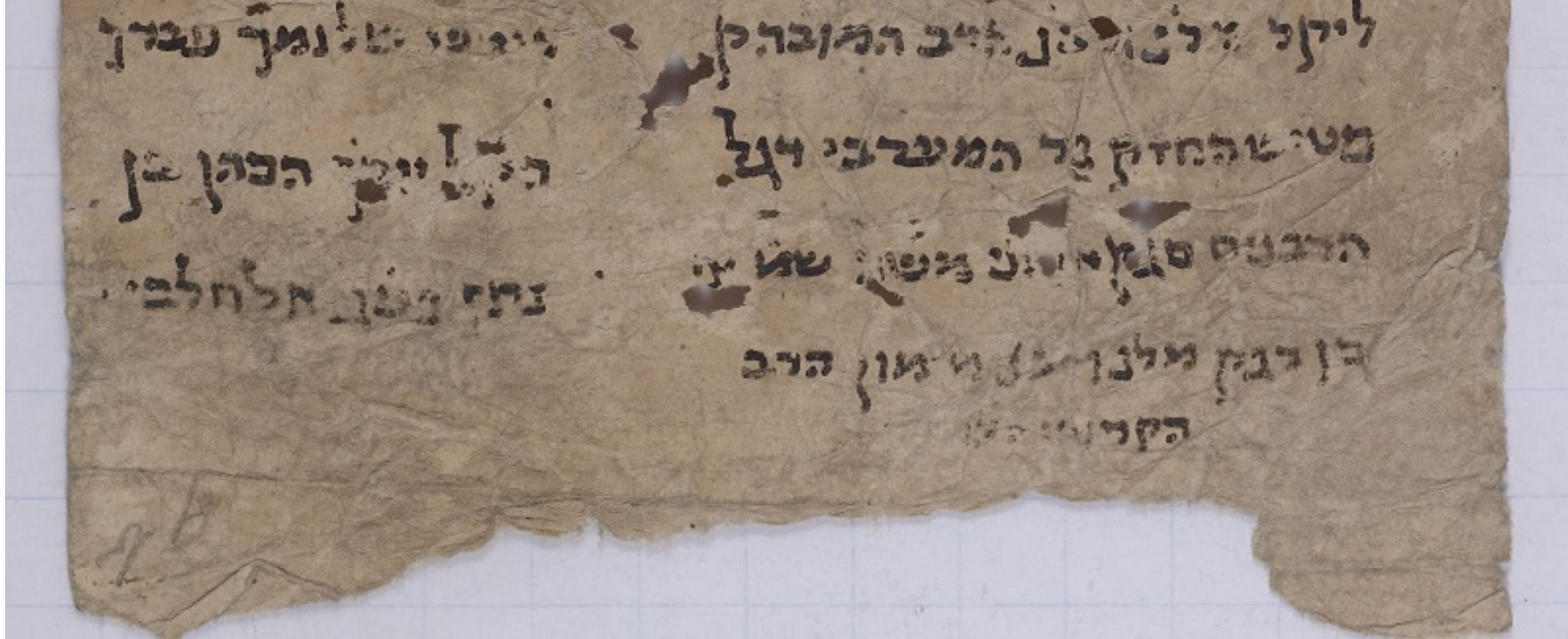
This letter was discovered among the documents of the Jewish Theological Seminary's ENA Collection, currently stored in Princeton University, when Amir Ashur was recently working on a short project there. It is surprising that it had not previously drawn the eyes of scholars, as the address identifying the Rambam as the recipient is clear. The particular combination of grandiloquent titles is also a major hint, if not specifically unique to the Rambam, that a Nagid is being addressed: 'the Distinguished Rav, the Mighty Hammer, the Western Lamp, Banner of the Rabbantes' are all titles associated with the Negidut in Egypt (and Spain) for at least a century before Maimonides was granted them.^[1] The elaborate and imaginative opening, however, draws on a wide range of biblical verses and fulsomely praises Maimonides' status, erudition, and position in the chain of Jewish tradition. While the formulaic repetition, in the correct order, of bombastic titles would not have looked out of place in a letter written a century before, to the Nagid Mevorakh b. Sa'adya, who had a fixed order to his impressive array of epithets (Cohen 1980: 264–266), the letter's artful stress on the recipient's intellectual accomplishments, his expertise as a teacher and his role as a guardian of halakha, mark this out as addressing not just a man of great status in his community, but a man of renowned intellect, of spiritual status and scholarly attainment.^[2]



Jewish Theological Seminary ENA 4020.56 recto, a letter by Joseph b. Nathan.

Image provided by the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

1. [ש]מ רח[מ]
2. עבדו וממלכו יסוף אלולכי
3. ועל דרכי נה אור
4. יאמנו צד[ק] קולו יחולו שלמות לאין ת[נ]כים
5. מחברות בברכת בשמחות חוה ה[נ] [...]
6. [.....] כעץ הדוד
7. נעבות מהודר כאשכולת נפנים הבין בדקדוקין
8. ובעינים התחומים האפונים מנות וחוקים נוצר
9. קדומה ששלם בכמה שנים אשל נאשל בשלשלת
10. בייחוס אבות הגונים מלמד למידת לדון ולמדות
11. המתגברות כמענים מחכמות מרחמנים חכמים
12. ומכיתות מחכונים מכינים קונים קדומה אלפיים
13. כיו לרוב אחיו ענוסי מעים שוקד דלתי תושיות
14. ותמך ארצות ליושר בחיות טוב ונעים שמו בפי
15. כל המאשרים נתנו עיריהם ערדון כל המפארים
16. כהור יצא מעדן ופושט פירו והיה לארבעה נהרים
17. אל יחריב אלה אל מימי המנות ואלי ידלי את קוקר
18. ביתנו עץ שותף על פלי מים עיליה לתופרה
19. כבוד גדלת קדשת מורי רובי משה רבינו המנוח
20. רח[מ]ן ערב דגל הרבנים יחיד הדור ופלאו....
21. [...]



JTS ENA 4020.56, a detail of the verso showing the address.

Image provided by the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

The address

1. ליקר מורי רובי: הרב המובהק
2. פטיש החזק נר המעריב: דגל
3. הרבנים אדוני אדוני משה שמי צ"ו
4. בן כהן מורי רובי מימון הרב
5. הקדוש נע"ו

1. In Your name O Merciful One
2. His servant and his slave Joseph al-Halabi
3. 'And the light shall shine upon your ways' (Job 22:29)
4. May he be declared the righteous one of his community, may good things whirl about without number
5. Joining up with blessings and boons ...
6. ... like a goody tree,
7. like splendid foliage, like clusters of vines. An expert in fine detail
8. and in hidden and recondite matters, a guardian of commandments and laws
9. older than the world by many years, a tamarisk firmly rooted in the chain of
10. tradition of worthy ancestors, a teacher at the pinnacle of instruction, of knowledge
11. that grows mighty like springs. From his wisdom, the wise become wiser,
12. and from his insight, the discerning gain understanding of His two-thousand-year-old creation.
13. Like the one 'accepted of the multitude of his brethren', born from the belly of the one who watches at the doors of sound wisdom
14. and he who upholds paths for guiding the righteous. Good and pleasant is his name in the mouths of
15. all who lead the way – they have presented their witnesses – and all those who glorify his righteousness.
16. Like a river running down from Eden, thereafter splitting up to become four rivers,
17. let God not cause the waters of his wisdom to dry up, nor bring low the source of
18. his insight. A tree planted by the channels of the rivers, his leaves be for balm.
19. The honourable, great, holy, our master and our teacher Moses, the Distinguished Rav,
20. [the Mighty Hammer,] the Western Lamp, Banner of the Rabbantes, Unique One of the Generation and its Wonder,...

The address (verso):

Right

1. To our dear master and our teacher, the Distinguished Rav
2. The Mighty Hammer, the Western Lamp, Banner of
3. the Rabbantes, the h[onourable], g[reat], h[oly], our master and our teacher Moses – his Rock preserve him –
4. son of the h[onourable], g[reat], h[oly], our master and our teacher Maymūn the Holy Rav –
5. his rest is in the Garden of Eden.

Left

1. Seeker of your wellbeing, your simple servant
2. Joseph ha-Kohen son of
3. Nathan – his rest is in the Garden of Eden – al-Halabi.

Notes on the translation:

Main text

1. In full, רחמנא, רחמנא.
6. 'Like a goodyly tree' is taken from Leviticus 23:40.
7. 'Like splendid foliage' is from Leviticus 23:40. 'Like clusters of vines' is from Proverbs 7:8.
- 8–9. 'Laws older than the world by many years' refers to Moses of the Torah. Proverbs 8:23 is one commonly used biblical proof that the Torah is older than the world.
13. The writer probably meant to write כרתי, but accidentally wrote נבו. The phrase 'accepted of the multitude of his brethren' is from Esther 10:3, where it describes the biblical Mordechai. Maimonides bore the title 'Mordechai of his age', as the twelfth-century Nagid Samuel b. Hananya had before him (Cohen 1980: 12, 280).
13. 'Born from the belly of the one who watches at the doors of sound wisdom' combines Proverbs 8:34 and 8:14.
15. 'They have presented their witnesses' borrows from Isaiah 43:9.
16. 'Four rivers' is from Genesis 2:10.
18. 'A tree planted by the channels of the rivers' borrows from Psalms 1:3.
19. In full, מורנו רובנו, רובנו.
- 19–20. 'The Distinguished Rav, the Mighty Hammer, the Western Lamp, Banner of the Rabbantes' etc were the twelfth-century titles, many of them having been inherited from previous Nagids, such as Mevorakh b. Sa'adya in the eleventh–early twelfth centuries (cf. Cohen 1980: 264–266). The 'Western Lamp' is a reference to the lamps that burned in the Temple, see B.T. Tamid 33a (and M. Tamid 3:5), and was earlier used of Samuel ha-Nagid (Samuel ibn Nagrilla), lauding him as 'the Lamp of the West, i.e. the great light of the Maghreb' (Cohen 1967: 282).

Address

Right

3. The abbreviation כה"ק is the standard epistolary mode of address in the Classical Genizah period, three construct nouns.
5. The abbreviation נע"ו is נא עון נא, one of a number of common post-mortem blessings.

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[1] Moses Maimonides criticised certain people in his own day for having meaningless, high-sounding titles, connected to defunct institutions, such as the Palestinian Academy (Kraemer 2008: 227). These were quite different from his titles, which he had earned through public service and which the positions he held in the community.

[2] This is not to belittle Mevorakh's own attainments in the field of jurisprudence and the writing of responsa, but there's a clear winner when one compares the author of 'The Guide', the Commentary on the Mishnah and the Mishneh Torah, with the man who trained his parrot to recite the Sema (on which see Cohen 1980: 120).

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